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## AFTERLIFE

"WE LIVE ON FAITH," MY father used to say. "The afterlife is all we have."

I wasn't sure of any afterlife. My questions troubled my father, who was pastor of our little church. He made me kneel with him to pray and listen to long chapters from the Bible on the altar. That sacred book, he said, had come from the holy Mother Earth. It looked old enough, the brittle yellow pages breaking loose from the cracked leather binding, but if its miracles had ever really happened, that had been a hundred light-years away and long millennia ago.

"If there is a God," I told him, "and if he heard our prayers, we'd all be dead before we ever got his answer."

With an air of tragic sorrow, he warned me that such reckless words could put my immortal soul in danger.

"We ourselves are miracles," he told me, "happening every day. Our whole planet was the Lord's miraculous answer to the prayers of the first Earthmen to land here. They found it rich in everything, and spoiled it with their own greed and folly."

I heard the history of that from our one-legged schoolmaster. Our first dozen centuries had been a golden age. We settled both great continents, harvested the great forests, loaded fleets of space freighters with precious hardwoods and rare metals. All that wealth was gone two thousand years ago.

Sadly, he showed us a few precious relics he kept in the dusty cupboard he called a museum. There was a little glass tube that he said had shone with the light of a hundred candles when there was power to make it burn, and a dusty telephone that once had talked around the world.

We were born poor, in a poor little village. On the Sabbaths, my father preached in the adobe-walled church. On weekdays, he got into his dusty work clothes and ground corn on a little grist mill turned by a high waterwheel. His pay was a share of the meal.

Wheat grew on the flat land down in the valley below us, but the soil in our hill country had eroded too badly for wheat. Through most of the week we ate cornmeal mush for breakfast and corn pones for bread. Sometimes my mother made white bread or even honey cakes, when church members from the valley gave us wheat flour.

On the Sabbaths she played a wheezy old organ to accompany the hymns. I used to love the music and the promise of a paradise where the just and good would live happily forever, but now I saw no reason to believe it. With no life here at home, I longed to get away into the wider universe, but I saw no chance of that.

It's seven light-years to the nearest settled star system. The trade ships quit coming long

ago, because we had nothing left to trade. There's only the mail ship, once every Earth year. It arrives nearly empty and leaves with every sling filled with those lucky people who find money for the fare.

It lands at the old capitol, far across the continent. I'd never been there, nor seen any kind of starship till the year I turned twelve. That quiet Sabbath morning, the rest of the family was gone in the wagon with my father to a revival meeting in another village down the river. Expecting no miracle there or anywhere, I'd been happy to stay home and do the chores.

Awakened by a rooster crowing, I was walking out to the barn to milk our three cows. I heard something thundering across the sky. In a moment I found it, a flash of silver when it caught the sun. I dropped the milk bucket, staring while it wheeled low over the crumbled ruins of something that had stood on the hill west of us.

It turned and dived straight at me.

With no time to run, I stood frozen while it sank over the west pasture and the apple orchard. It struck the cornfield and plowed on though a cloud of dust and flying rocks till it stopped at the edge of my mother's kitchen. Its thunder ceased. It lay still, a smoking mass of broken metal.

I stood there watching, waiting for something more to happen. Nothing did. I caught my breath at last, and walked uneasily toward it. Nothing about it made any kind of sense until I looked into the long furrow it had dug and found a torn and bleeding human arm. A leg farther on, most of the skin torn off. Another naked leg, still attached to the mangled body. Finally a hairless skull grinning from the bottom of the ditch.

Dazed by the sudden strangeness of it, I thought I ought to call my father or the constable or the schoolmaster, but they were all away at the revival. I was still there, wondering what to do, when I saw a carrion bird hovering over the body. I shouted and threw stones to keep it away till some of the neighbors came from up the river. We gathered up what we could, the smallest red scraps in my milk bucket, and carried them into the church.

The sheriff came on horseback, the doctor with him. They frowned over the body parts, laid out on a long table made of planks laid across the benches. The doctor fitted them closer together to see if anything was missing. The sheriff picked up pieces of broken metal, scowled at them uneasily, threw them back in the ditch.

They all left at last, for their dinners or whatever they had to do. I think they were afraid of too much they didn't understand. So was I, but I didn't like the flies buzzing around the body. I went home for a sheet to cover it. After a cold corn pone and a bowl of clabbered milk for lunch, I came back to look at the wreck again, and watch the empty sky. Nothing else came down.

Evening came. I milked the cows again, fed the pig, found a dozen eggs in the nests. I heard dogs barking and went back to the church to be certain the door was closed. Night fell as I was walking home. Our planet has no moon. In the sudden darkness, the stars

were a blaze of diamonds.

I stopped to look up at them, wondering about the stranger. Where was his home? Why had he come here? What could have gone so terribly wrong when he tried to land? The answers were beyond me, but I stood there a long time, wishing I'd been born somewhere else, with a chance to see worlds more exciting than our own.

In the empty house, I lit a candle, ate another corn pone and a piece of fried chicken my mother had left for me, went to bed. Trying to forget the vulture circling over that skinned skull in the ditch, I lay listening to the tick of the old clock in the hall till I heard the rattle of my father's wagon.

My mother and my sister came in the house while he drove on to stable the team. News of the dead stranger stopped their chatter about the meeting. My father lit a candle lantern when he heard about it, and we all walked across the road to the church. My mother lifted the sheet to look at the body.

She screamed and my father dropped the lantern.

"Alive! It's alive!"

The candle had gone out. I shivered when I heard some small creature scurry away in the dark. My father's hands must have been shaking; it took him a long time to find a match to light the candle again. The long naked body was a man's, black with dried blood and horribly scarred, but somehow whole again.

The bald skull had hair again, a short pale fuzz. The eyes were open, staring blindly up into the dark. The body seemed stiff and hard, but I saw the blood-caked chest rise and slowly fall. My mother reached to touch it, and said she felt a heartbeat.

My father made me saddle my pony and go for the doctor. I had to hammer at the door a long time before he came out in his underwear to call me crazy for waking him in the middle of the night with such a cock-and-bull story. If we had a live man there at the church, it had to be some drunk who had crept inside to sober up.

Still angry, he finally dressed and saddled a horse to come back with me. My mother had lit candles at the altar. My father was on his knees before it, praying. The doctor threw the sheet off the man, felt his wrist, and said he'd be damned.

"The hand of God!" my father whispered, backing away and dropping back to his knees. "A holy miracle! We prayed at the meeting for a sign to help us persuade the unbelievers. And the good Lord has answered!"

"Maybe." The doctor squinted at me. "Or is it some trick of Satan?"

My mother brought a basin of warm water and helped him wash off the clots of blood and mud. His eyes closed, the man seemed to be sleeping. He woke when day came, and sat up to stare blankly at the empty benches around him. His blond hair and beard had grown longer. The scars had disappeared.

My mother asked how he felt.

He blinked at her and shivered, wrapping the sheet around himself.

"Are you the Son of God?" My father knelt before him. "Have you come to save the world?"

He shook his head in a puzzled way.

My mother asked if he was hungry. He nodded, and rose unsteadily when she asked if he could. She took his hand and led him out of the church and down the street to our house. He limped slowly beside her, peering around him as if everything was strange.

"Sir?" The doctor came up beside him. "Can you tell us who you are?"

He made a strange animal grunt and shook his head again.

At our house, my mother brought him a glass and a pitcher of apple juice. He gulped it thirstily and sat watching her fix breakfast. My father brought clothing for him, and a pair of shoes. He sat frowning at them and finally stood up to dress himself, slow and clumsy about it, and let me tie the shoes.

"Sir?" The doctor stood watching. "Where are you from?"

"Earth." He spoke at last, his voice deep and slow. "I am here from Mother Earth."

My mother set a plate for him. He studied the knife and fork as if they were new to him, but plied them ravenously when she brought a platter of ham and scrambled eggs. She had set plates for the doctor and my father, but they forgot to eat.

"You were dead." My father was hoarse with awe. "How can you live again?"

"I was never dead." He reached to stab another slice of ham. "I am eternal."

"Eternal?" The doctor blinked and squinted at him. "Do you mean immortal?"

"I --" He paused as if he had to search for words. "I do not die."

"I saw you dead." The doctor swallowed hard and watched him slice the ham. "What brought you back?"

"The power." Smiling as though glad to find what to say, he wiped his lips with a slice of white bread. "The immortal power that moves the mortal body."

"I see," the doctor muttered, as if he really did. "Why are you here?"

"If immortality interests you, that is what I bring."

The doctor blinked, startled into silence. My father muttered something under his breath and moved to a chair across the room. My mother had made a pot of tea. The man drained a tall glass of it, sweetened with honey. Seeming to grow stronger and brighter, he began

asking questions. He wanted to know about our history, cities, industries, governments, ways of travel. Did ships from Earth ever land here? I thought he looked pleased that the mail skipper was not due soon. Our neighbors had crowded the kitchen by then, and we all moved into the front room. Somebody asked his name.

"Who cares?" He shrugged, standing tall in the middle of the room. "Your world is new to me. I come to you as a new man, an agent of eternity. I bring you the gift of eternal life."

"Eternal?" The doctor had recovered his voice. "Just what do you mean?"

"My secrets are my own." He was suddenly smiling, his voice resonant and strong. "But if you wish to live forever, follow me."

Too many people had pushed into our house by then, and the blacksmith wanted to take him to speak at the church. Stubbornly, my father shook his head.

"I don't know what he is, but he claims no power from God. He could be a son of Satan, scheming to trap our souls for hell. I don't want him in my church. Get him out of my house!"

"He's slick as a barrel of eels," the doctor agreed. "I wouldn't believe him if he swore the sun came up this morning. But I don't--" He shrugged uneasily toward the wreckage in the cornfield. "I want to know more about him."

The sheriff escorted him to a vacant lot. My father stayed away, but I followed with my sister. The sheriff helped him to the top of an old stone slab that must have supported some public monument when our world was great. We all crowded around. He stood silent while the blacksmith spoke to tell how he had risen from the dead. The murmur of voices died into breathless expectation as we waited for him to speak. I heard a dog barking somewhere, and a rooster crowing. I thought he looked handsome, even in the misfit garments.

"He can't be the demon Dad says he is." I saw a glow of awed admiration on my sister's face. "I believe he's an angel sent from Heaven to save us."

He spread his arms to beckon us closer.

"I see that your world has suffered misfortune."

His voice rang loud and clear, but he paused to gesture at the muddy ruts we called a street and our straggle of mud-walled, straw-roofed homes. He turned to nod at the rubble mounds of what had been a city on the hill behind him.

"I knew poverty like yours back on the mother world. It is ruled by the rich. They live in great mansions, with swarms of servants and every luxury. Skipping time on space flights to their estates on other planets, they stretch their lives almost forever. The very richest can pay for microbots."

"Microbots?" the doctor shouted. "What are they?"

"Tiny robots." He slowed his voice to help us understand. "They circulate like cells in the blood, repairing all the damage of illness and age. Their owners are immortal, gathering wealth and knowledge and power as they live though century after century. They have everything.

"We mortals were poor as you are."

He shrugged at the shabby streets with a grimace of remembered pain.

"Poorer, because they have kept us down, generation after generation born to toil and die in ignorance of all that might have helped us. To keep us humble, they have allowed us to learn no more than our tasks required. Most have no escape except to breed another generation to suffer and die as we have always done.

"I was lucky. My mother's husband worked as a janitor in a university that taught the children of the rich. He stole books and holo cubes to let me learn at home. She was a housemaid for an immortal scientist. They had an affair they never confessed, but my mother told me I am his son. He made me his lab assistant when I was old enough, finally made me his subject for the experiment that made me eternal."

I heard a buzz of excitement in the crowd, and then a volley of breathless questions.

"If you don't believe, ask those who saw me arrive." He paused to let his eyes search out the doctor, the sheriff, me. "They saw my body heal from what they thought was death."

"I saw a dead man," the doctor muttered uneasily. "But I don't know how--"

His voice trailed off.

"I'll tell you how." The stranger smiled, and his voice pealed louder. "I bring you my father's secret gift to me, something simpler than the microbots and a better way to immortality. It has alarmed the old immortals, who have made laws and broken laws to keep the microbots for themselves forever.

"They raided and wrecked my father's lab, left me for dead. I recovered. My mother brought me the keys to his private skipship. I am not a pilot, but I had watched him drive the ship. The robotic controls got me here, though I botched the landing and injured myself."

Wryly, he gestured toward the twisted metal in the cornfield.

"You have seen how I recovered."

He spread his arms again and posed to display his body. Splendid now, it showed no scars. I saw a flash of gold from his hair, now grown almost to his shoulders, and heard a soft cry from my sister. Awe had hushed the crowd. Far off, I heard the rooster crow again.

"A child of God!" my sister whispered. "Here to save us!"

People stood frozen for a moment, then pushed anxiously closer. I heard a babble of

questions.

"Can you make me whole again?" That was the blacksmith's crippled son, caked with smoke and sweat from the forge. "How can we repay you?"

"Just follow me," he said. "Do as I say."

He had brought his gift for all mankind, he said. He wanted to carry it on to the capitol. The blacksmith passed a hat for money to buy him a horse. The tailor gave him a jacket. The sheriff deputized the schoolmaster to be his bodyguard and show him the way. He slept that night at the doctor's house. When he left next morning, the doctor, the blacksmith, and the schoolmaster rode away with him. My sister came out with me to watch them go by. She broke into tears as they passed.

"An angel!" she whispered. "I'd die to be with him."

She stood in the dusty street looking after them till he was gone from sight, and waited with the rest of us, hoping for him to return. He never did. She grew up to be a beautiful woman and the mistress of our one-room school. The blacksmith's son courted her devotedly, but she never forgot the stranger.

An artist of some talent, she painted a portrait of him, standing on a planet out in starry space, a golden halo shining above his head. It hung in her room, above a candle and a scrap of twisted metal from his ship. Once I caught her kneeling to it.

With nowhere else to go, most of us stayed at home in the village. The doctor's young bride learned to make her living as a midwife. The blacksmith's son got his younger brother to help at the forge and became a smith himself. News moves slowly on our planet, but we began to hear tales of the miraculous Agent who had risen from death, won new believers by the thousand, built a magnificent Temple of Eternity at the capitol. My sister longed to follow him there, and cried when my father called him the Agent of Satan.

The doctor and the schoolmaster returned at last, in a coach drawn by four fine black horses, a uniformed driver seated in front and a footman standing behind. Another four-horse team pulled a long, black-painted wagon. They stopped on the village square. Half a dozen men in long black robes climbed out of the wagon to set up a platform on one side of the coach and a black tent on the other. They unpacked drums and trumpets and instruments I had never seen, and brought the street to life with music I had never heard.

When a curious crowd had gathered, the schoolmaster hopped out of the black wagon, still nimble on his wooden leg. No longer the shabby little mouse I remembered, he was robed in gold and black velvet.

"My father?" The blacksmith's son limped anxiously to meet him. "Is he coming home?"

The trumpets drowned anything the schoolmaster said.

"Is he -- is he dead?"

"Alive." The schoolmaster waved his hand. The music stopped, and he lifted his voice for the rest of us. "Alive forever, safe in Eternity."

He strutted to the coach and climbed to stand on the driver's seat. His voice pealed louder. Our village was a sacred place, he said, because here the Agent had died and risen again from death. He and the doctor had been blessed to witness that first miracle. As chosen Voices of Eternity, they had now returned to share the blessing of eternal life with all of their old friends who wished it.

My father had pushed to the front of the crowd.

"By what power, and by what name," he demanded, "do you preach the resurrection of the dead?"

"The Agent has power enough of his own." Glaring down at him, schoolmaster waved as if to knock him aside. "He needs no other name, and some of you here witnessed his own resurrection."

"I call him by his true names," my father shouted. "Satan! Lucifer! Beelzebub! The Prince of Darkness!" He dropped his voice. "I am sorry to hear you repeating his lies, because all of you were once true children of our true Lord. I beg you to repent and confess, that your mortal sins may be blotted out--"

The schoolmaster gestured, and a bray of trumpets drowned the words.

"You call yourselves Voices," my father tried again. "I beg you to listen for the voice of God. Listen to Him in your hearts, speaking through the Holy Ghost."

"I never met a holy ghost."

My father flushed red at the mockery.

"Listen to the words, of Eternity!" The schoolmaster raised his head to look beyond my father. "We bring you something better than myth and ignorant superstition. I pray you to heed the verities of scientific truth and save your own precious lives. Learn the new science of veronics. For you with open minds, let me lay out the actual facts."

"Facts?" my father shouted. "Or Satanic lies?"

The blacksmith's son caught his arm.

"The words of the Agent." The schoolmaster frowned as if we were backward students. "He has taught the simple truth. The veron is an energy particle. Carrying neither mass nor dimension, it is mind without matter. The so-called human soul in fact the veronic being. The Agent has taught us how to liberate it into Eternity. Freed from slavery to the mortal flesh, with all its faults and ills, your immortal minds can live forever."

He paused for a paeon of rousing music, and asked for questions when it ceased.

What proof could he offer?



"Look inside yourselves." He paused, with nods and smiles of recognition for my mother and my sister. "Haven't every one of you hated the limits and pains of your bodies? Haven't you all enjoyed moments of liberty from space and time, as you recalled the past, looked into the future, thought of far-off friends? Those were precious glimpses of your future freedoms in eternity!

"If you want to live forever, step forward now!"

The doctor came down from the coach to a table set up in front of the black tent. Robed like the schoolmaster in gold and black velvet, he had grown grayer and fatter than I recalled him. Silently, he spread his arms to urge us forward. The music rose again. The blacksmith's deserted wife hobbled toward him. Arthritic and blind, she leaned on her limping son.

"Eat. Drink." Intoning the words, the doctor gestured at a platter and a pitcher on the table. "One little wafer and one small sip of this veronic fluid will break the chains of flesh to set you free. But you must be warned."

He dropped his voice and raised his hands.

"This final feast is only for those who trust the Agent and accept the miracle of his resurrection. Once you have felt the joy of eternity, there is no turning back. I must remind you also that you take nothing with you."

Tears washing white channels down his dark-grimed face, the blacksmith's son shouted the warning into his mother's ear. She mumbled and opened her mouth. He dropped jingling coins into a basket on the table. The doctor laid a tiny white wafer on her tongue, put a little glass of a blood-red liquid to her drooling lips. She gulped it down. Two men in black took her arms to help her into the tent.

Next came the baker's old and helpless father, moaning on a stretcher carried by the baker and his helper. A dozen others shuffled forward. Finally my sister. Tears on her face, she hugged our mother and our father, darted to startle the blacksmith's son with a kiss and a quick embrace, and fell into the line. I caught her arm to pull her back.

"Let her go." My father was hoarse with pain. "She has damned herself."

The solemn music rose again. The line crept forward, my sister the last. My father knelt on the ground, murmuring a prayer. My mother stood silently sobbing. My sister dropped something into the basket, the gold necklace and gold earrings the blacksmith's son had given her. I heard a stifled moan from him. Smiling, she swallowed the wafer and the liquid. My mother cried out, shrill with pain. My sister looked back and tried to speak, but her voice was already gone. Her features stiffened. She staggered. The black robes hustled her into the tent.

With a final flourish, the music ceased. The doctor intoned a solemn assurance that these beloved beings were happy now, forever free from grief and care. He and the schoolmaster climbed back into the coach. The musicians dismantled their instruments

and knocked down the platform where they had stood. They rolled up the black tent, loaded everything on the wagon, and followed the coach back to the road down the river.

The bodies were left lying in a row on the ground. My mother knelt to close my sister's eyes. My father stood above them to beg the Lord that all their sins and blunders might be forgiven and their souls received into God's own paradise. Neighbor men toiled all night, nailing coffins together. Next day a pastor came from the village below to preach a farewell service before the boxes were lowered into the row of new graves.

One morning next spring, while my mother was making breakfast, we saw a bright silver skipship lying in the cornfield where the stranger's craft had fallen. Another tall stranger was poking into the tangle of tall weeds and rusted metal where it had stopped. He came across the garden to our door.

When I answered his knock, he displayed a holo card that showed the bright round Earth spinning in starry black space. Silver print across it identified him as a field inspector for the Pan-Terran Police. Pointing back at the wreck, he asked for anything we knew about it. My mother asked him to share our grits and bacon while we told him what we could about the ship and the Agent and the Church of Eternity.

"We believed --" She broke into tears when she spoke of my sister's death. "We had seen him risen from the dead. She trusted him."

"Satan!" my father rasped. "He dragged my daughter down to Hell!"

"He was a criminal." The inspector nodded in sober sympathy. "The tale he told you was largely a hoax. It's true that he was a native Earthman, but no verons exist, no veronic bodies either. Though he did have microbots in his blood, he had no skills or know-how to share them with anybody else."

Sobbing, my mother rose to leave the room.

"Listen to him!" My father was hoarse with his own emotion. "The Lord will help us bear the truth."

"A vicious criminal." Regretfully, the inspector shook his head. "But also the victim of tragedy. He was the offspring of a mortal woman's illicit affair with an immortal. He inherited his father's microbots. They should have been destroyed, but that would have crippled or probably killed him. It must have been a desperate choice, but his mother kept him as he was and kept his secret till he was grown. She was arrested when the truth came out, but he escaped in his father's skipship. I regret the harm he did here, but at least his evil career is over."

"Over?" My father stared at him. "If he is immortal--"

"His church officials will no doubt claim that he's still alive in some veronic paradise." The inspector grinned. "But microbots aren't magic. They are only electronic devices. When we located him here, we were able to shut them down with a radio signal. His natural body functions had become dependent on the microbots. His heart stopped when they did."

"He will trouble you no longer."

"Thank you, sir." My father reached over the table to shake his hand. "You have served as a faithful agent of the Lord."

"Or the Pan-Terran Police."

After breakfast, the inspector asked me to clear the weeds around the wreckage to let him take holos of it. He walked with my father over our little farm and wanted to see the farm tools and the mules in the barn. He looked at my mother's garden and asked about the plants she grew. He had me show him the windmill and the water wheel and the grist mill, and tell him how they worked.

He watched me slop the hogs and milk the cows that night, and went with my parents to the hymn service at the church while I stayed home to finish the chores. My mother let him sleep in the room that had been my sister's. Next morning he watched my father kindle the fire in the old cast iron stove and watched my mother fix the breakfast. When we had eaten, he looked sharply at me and asked what I planned for the future.

"I never had a future," I told him. "I always longed to get away, but never had a chance."

"If he had a chance --" He turned to my parents. "Could you let him go?"

They stared at him and whispered together.

"If he could really get away --" My mother tried to smile at my father. "We have each other."

My father nodded solemnly. "The Lord's will be done."

The inspector let his shrewd eyes measure me again.

"It would be forever," he told me gravely. "As final as death."

"Let him go," my father said. "He has earned his own salvation."

The inspector took me out to see his skipship. It was strange and wonderful, but I was too dazed and anxious to understand what he said about it. He had me sit, looked me in the eye, and asked for more about my life.

"I stay alive," I told him. "I'm the janitor for my father's church, though I've never caught his faith. I help him at the mill and help my mother in her garden."

My heart thumping, I waited again until he asked, "Would you like to be immortal?"

Hardly breathing, I found no words to say.

"Perhaps you can be," he said. "If you want the risk. The immortals have to guard their own future. They want no rivals here, but they have agreed to let us send an expedition to colonize the Andromeda galaxy. There's a two-million-year skip each way, which leaves them safe from any harm from us."

He frowned and shook his head.

"We ourselves can't feel so confident. No skip so far has ever been attempted. It's a jump into the dark, with no data to let us compute any sure destination. We may be lost forever from our own universe of space, with no way back. Even if we're lucky, we'll have new frontiers to face, with our industrial infrastructure still to build. We're likely to need the skills and the knowledge you have learned here. I can sign you on, if you want the chance."

I said I did.

My mother dried her tears and kissed me. My father made us kneel and pray together. I hugged them both, and the inspector took me with him to board the departing mother ship.

ALL THAT WAS TWO million years ago and two million light-years behind us. That long jump dropped us into the gravity well of a giant black hole, but we were able to coast around it in free fall, with no harm at all. The third skip brought us into low orbit around our new planet, a kind world that had no native life and needed no terraforming. My low-tech skills did help us stay alive. The microbots have learned them, and we are well established now.

I have recalled this story for our children and their microbots to remember. I was at first uneasy about letting the microbots into my body. For a long time I hardly felt them, but they're beginning now to give me a new zest for life, a new happiness with all my new friends, an endless delight in the wonders of our new world.

Our new sky blazes with more stars than I ever imagined, all in strange constellations, but on a clear night we can make out our home galaxy, a faint fleck of brightness low in the south. Remembering my parents, who lived so far away and long ago, I wish they could have known the true afterlife we've discovered here.